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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature regarding funeral ritual deals with a definition of what ritual is, what it does within the societal context, and how it attempts to accomplish facilitation of grief work. General consensus among the theorists is that ritual consists of organized action conveying meaning and intent with the purpose of perpetuating societal predictability and providing a personal means of dealing with the chaotic process of grief. This study investigated the role and function of funeral ritual. Qualitative method was used in a triangulation study in which clergy, funeral professionals, and lay mourners participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed a consensus across respondents regarding general components of ritual. Seven key functions of ritual were identified: (1) acknowledging the death; (2) promoting acceptance of the death; (3) facilitating acceptance of change; (4) offering structure during chaos; (5) providing opportunities to strengthen bonds; (6) providing access to community support; and (7) offering meaning in the context of death. The final finding of this study related to the media and their influence on societal death perceptions. (LLL)

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Post-Death Ritual in a Colorado Community

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role and function of funeral ritual. Qualitative method was used in a triangulation study in which clergy, funeral professionals, and lay mourners participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed a consensus across respondents regarding general components of ritual. Seven key functions of ritual were identified: 1) Acknowledgement of the death, 2) Promoting acceptance of the death, 3) Facilitating acceptance of change, 4) Offering structure during chaos, 5) Providing opportunities to strengthen bonds, 6) Providing access to community support, 7) Offering meaning in the context of death. The influence of the media on societal death perceptions is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature regarding funeral ritual deals with a definition of what ritual is, what it does within the societal context, and how it attempts to accomplish facilitation of grief work. General consensus among the theorists was that ritual consisted of organized action conveying meaning and intent with the purpose of perpetuating societal predictability and providing a personal means of dealing with the chaotic process of grief (1,2,3).

Rodabough (1981) notes an additional aspect of ritual, that of structured role definitions which act as protective devices for mourners (4). Structured communication patterns, like structured role definitions, play an important part in the ritual process (5).

Swanson and Bennett (1982) in a quantitative study of 152 mourners, found that the closer the mourner was to the deceased the greater the benefit derived from funeral ritual (6). Bolton and Camp (1987) investigated the impact of pre-, during, and post-death rituals on 50 survivors (3). They concluded that the most effective rituals were those that occurred after the funeral which involved more personalized and private acts by the mourner. Doka (1984), surveying 50 bereaved individuals, found that the entirety of funeral ritual was helpful, but specific aspects of ritual were not addressed (7). These researchers have not addressed the many dimensions of personal responses to the multiple components of ritual. Both individual responses and funeral ritual were treated as unitary entities. There is little evidence in the literature of quantitative or qualitative studies which attempt to delineate

the multiplicity of both the personal perception of the process and the multiple elements of ritual which may include a religiously based funeral service, mass, or memorial service, or informal and private rituals, such as the planting of a tree to symbolize remembrance of the one who has died.

The object of this study was to explore both the "how" and "why" of ritual action following a death. The actions that were engaged in and individual perceptions of those actions were studied. The qualitative nature of this study led to an investigation and disclosure process that was more personalized regarding the rituals practiced in one small community. By using a triangulation process and evaluating recurrent themes presented by clergy, funeral professionals, and mourners, consistency of response could be examined.

METHOD

Qualitative method was used in a triangulation study of clergy, funeral professionals, and mourners to determine the nature and function of ritual in the time between death and interment of the deceased.

Subjects

Five local funeral professionals were interviewed. Eleven clergy were selected from the community to represent the diversity of religious practice. They were selected on a continuum from the very traditional to less traditional. Eight lay people who had experienced the loss of various loved ones, from spouse, to sibling, to friend, were referred by the clergy or were interviewed

on a volunteer basis.

Procedure

Data for this study was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant who was then asked to read and sign a consent form. In the case of the clergy, referrals of lay mourners were requested, but not required, and if referrals were made the clergy was asked to be a primary counselor to the individual if problems should arise. Each participant was allowed to preview the list of 10-13 questions before beginning. Interviews were taped and conducted in the interviewees home or office. Each interview was transcribed and coded for confidentiality. Thematic analysis was used and recurrent themes pulled from the three groups, then compared and contrasted to assure consistency.

Limitations

This study has several limitations inherent in it. Volunteer bias is an issue due to the recruiting process. Only those persons willing to participate did so. The sample size was small, reflecting only one small community. Results cannot, therefore, be generalized to all people. Different areas of the country and different ethnic groups would reflect somewhat different perceptions. This study attempted to study objectively a very subjective topic. This is not an easy task. However, the strength of this study lies in its very subjectivity. For it is through the words of those interviewed that the bones of ritual are fleshed into a dynamic, meaningful entity.

RESULTS

The general components regarding the nature of ritual were identified as:

1) Formally organized behaviors conveying meaning and intent.

2) Formal role definition for both professionals and mourners.

3) A form of structured communication in which participants reaffirmed social, familial, and religious ties to the mourners and the greater community.

Distinct functions of ritual which were mentioned repeatedly by all three groups were:

1) Acknowledgement of the death.

2) Promoting acceptance of the death.

3) Facilitating the acceptance of change.

4) Offering structure and security in a time of chaos.

5) Providing the opportunity to reaffirm important bonds and strengthen the commitment to them.

6) Providing access to community support and comfort for those who are grieving.

7) Offer a meaningful context in which to make sense of death and its role in life.

Another variable that was noted in this study was the influence of the media on societal death perceptions.

DISCUSSION

This study focused, not only on what ritual is, but how the individuals involved with it feel about it. Personal perception and insight were stressed by the researcher and some unique and poignant information was shared by those who were interviewed. This section will explore some of those perceptions.

Many of the respondents stressed the importance of structure in the ritual process. "N", a funeral director, noted; "When it comes time to deal with death people truly don't know how to react to it. Ritual helps people react--it gives them something to lean on." He also gave an interesting analogy about life and ritual; "I feel life is like a highway, and every highway has a center line. It has a right side of the center line and a left side of the center line. Ritual or tradition is the center line. We can vary to the right or left of it, but as long as we have a ritual or a tradition we know where to come back to." Another funeral director, "J" stressed the importance of the occasion. He felt it was important to have a beginning, a middle, and an end to that occasion; that without these three components a sense of completeness was lost to the survivors.

"D", a bishop in the LDS (Mormon) Church, focused on communication issues. "Rituals are behaviors that have a relatively long history or tradition. I think they operate often at an unconscious level, but in some ways at a conscious level. But it's a series of behaviors that I think offer comfort or security. The community of people that engage in ritual use it as a way to communicate with one another. So I guess it's kind of an

institutionalized communication pattern."

From a Jewish perspective "B" related that intent was an important part of ritual participation. "Going through the motions has no religious value unless it's coupled with a certain kind of intent, of which one must be fully conscious as he goes on--and there must be a kind of sincerity and a constant awareness of communication with God."

Facing the reality of the death, and promoting the acceptance of the death was very important to "W", a Protestant minister. "[We must face the fact that] yes, this really has happened. And as painful as that is, it is very necessary. I try to shy away from euphoric terms. If they've just "gone away" they ought to come back. But if you call it what it really is people can handle that--if it's tactfully done."

"P", a funeral director, talked about a concrete problem involving children and the need to be clear with them about the reality of death. "Anytime you have children involved I think we give them two different messages. We say grandma or grandpa has gone to heaven--and for some reason we associate heaven with up and hell with down--so we say they have gone up to heaven, but we turn around and bury them. So we're giving them mixed messages."

All of the lay people who had lost loved ones expressed gratitude at the support they had received, not only from other family members, but from friends and members of their church or community. For some, the cards and letters made them realize how their loved one had touched other peoples lives. For others, shared stories about the loved one added insight and provided a

different view of the person they had loved. Funeral directors stressed the importance of having supportive friends and family available to the bereaved, and the clergy, in every instance, expressed the desire for involvement and supportive action on the part of the church family toward the bereaved.

"Z", a lay mourner, discussed the importance of his involvement in the funeral ritual for his mother. "For me, I don't see how you can be involved in the life process without also being involved with the death process. It would have been a real--shame is probably too strong a word--but it would've been a real discredit to my mom and our relationship to have just walked away from that portion of her life." Other responses echoed his feelings, indicating that, for each of them it was very important to do these last things for their loved ones; to carry through their essence in these final rituals of life.

Each person was asked about his or her perception of ritual, what it was, and what it did. They were also asked about the meaning of death. Many of the answers expressed a faith in life hereafter, or peace for one's self, or some philosophical idea of what death contributes to life. "L", a Catholic priest, replied frankly, and with gentle humor; "It would be a transition, a step. "The Final Illness." If I can face it that calmly when it happens is another question. Theoretically and intellectually I know that's what it is. Hopefully at the moment that it comes I'll be able to recall that and not panic." Another minister, "W", related a priceless story about one of his parishioners. He said, "As one terminally ill lady said to me just a few days before her death,

'We sing about heaven, and we talk about heaven--we read the Bible about heaven. But why do we put skid marks on the pavement when it's time to go?'"

One of the most intriguing parts of this study was the personal qualities that came through in the answers. Each individual was unique and experienced ritual in unique ways. Two cases in particular harken back to an earlier time, when death was still very much a family event and was treated as a part of the natural cycle of life. "V" lost her husband to cancer, and after he died she was able to participate in a very personal and meaningful rite. "Something that had been really important for my oldest daughter, (she's a nurse), was to bathe his body and prepare it. [We wanted] to send him off all clean and prepared in the best way that we, as a family could do. He had cancer and so many surgical wounds that had not healed up. There was just so much that had gone wrong with his body--and then his hair. He was so meticulous and in the last few days he was so weak they had not washed his hair. My daughter said, 'You can do his body, but I want to wash his hair. I think he would like that.' So she and I did that. You know, I really liked doing that. It was the last homey things that we could do for him."

"Z", who had lost his mother, related the following, "Both my parents are buried in a small mining town with an unincorporated cemetery. Where my parents are buried you can't get a backhoe in there so the graves have to be hand dug. And part of the tradition of living in that community is you take care of your own. So another ritual that was real meaningful to me was actually digging

my mom's grave. ...for me there's a real comforting sense to know, not only to know in a rational sense--but to physically know where my parents are, because I physically put them both there."

The final finding of this study related to the media and their influence on societal death perceptions. The funeral directors were particularly cognizant of this, reflecting both good and bad aspects of the media. Most felt that in this day and age the media's influence could not be discounted. The deaths and subsequent funeral rituals of world leaders and other prominent people are routinely brought into our homes via TV. This can be a positive experience, exposing many people to different cultural norms and values related to the death experience. Conversely, death is covered graphically and often in the media, which may lessen the emotional impact upon viewers and reduce empathy for grieving family members. Clearly we have developed a symbiotic relationship with the media, and whether for good or bad, we live and die by it.

SUMMARY

The overall perception of ritual was a positive one for those interviewed. If there were any complaints at all, they had to do with participants wanting to be more involved in the planning and implementation of the rituals for their loved ones. The bereaved felt compelled to invest the rituals with the essence of the one who had died, creating a tribute to a life that had been lived. An additional reflection of many of those interviewed was the need

for a slightly more extended mourning period in our society. "Z" summed up some of the frustration of those trying to process their grief in this fast-paced society. "I think the crummy thing about our society and rituals of death is that we shove it into a fairly condensed time frame. You know---'I'm sorry your mom died, sure you can take a couple weeks off.' And your first week is literally taken up with the whole formal, immediate rituals of death and burial. The second week is taken cleaning up stuff. But basically once you've done your 2-3 weeks of "death work" society wants you to get back to normal real quick. I don't think we do a very good job at that. I don't know how I would formalize it out further, but fairly quickly it's, 'I'm sorry whoever had died, but so what?' We're kind of a throw-away society in a lot of respects. Even people who have died are kind of thrown away."

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